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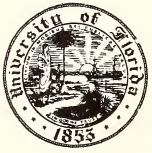

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Trial of a Poet

Books by Karl Shapiro:

PERSON, PLACE AND THING
V-LETTER AND OTHER POEMS
ESSAY ON RIME
TRIAL OF A POET AND OTHER POEMS

KARL SHAPIRO

TRIAL OF A POET

AND OTHER POEMS

REYNAL & HITCHCOCK, NEW YORK

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To F. O. Matthiessen

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Recapitulations

I

I was born downtown on a wintry day
And under the roof where Poe expired;
Tended by nuns my mother lay
Dark-haired and beautiful and tired.

Doctors and cousins paid their call,
The rabbi and my father helped.
A crucifix burned on the wall
Of the bright room where I was whelped.

At one week all my family prayed,
Stuffed wine and cotton in my craw;
The rabbi blessed me with a blade
According to the Mosaic Law.

The white steps blazed in Baltimore
And cannas and white statuary.
I went home voluble and sore
Influenced by Abraham and Mary.

II

At one the Apocalypse had spoken,
Von Moltke fell, I was housebroken.

At two how could I understand
The murder of Archduke Ferdinand?

France was involved with history,
I with my thumbs when I was three.

A sister came, we neared a war,
Paris was shelled when I was four.

I joined in our peach-kernel drive
For poison gas when I was five.

At six I cheered the big parade,
Burned sparklers and drank lemonade.

At seven I passed at school though I
Was far too young to say *Versailles*.

At eight the boom began to tire,
I tried to set our house on fire.

The Bolsheviks had drawn the line,
Lenin was striken, I was nine.

What evils do not retrograde
To my first odious decade?

III

Saints by whose pages I would swear,
    My Zarathustra, Edward Lear,
Ulysses, Werther, fierce Flaubert,
    Where are my books of yesteryear?

Sixteen and sixty are a pair;
    We twice live by philosophies;
My marginalia of the hair,
    Are you at one with Socrates?

Thirty subsides yet does not dare,
    Sixteen and sixty bang their fists.
How is it that I no longer care
    For Kant and the Transcendentalists?

Public libraries lead to prayer,
    EN ΑΡΧΗ ἦν ὁ λόγος—still
Eliot and John are always there
    To tempt our admirari nil.

IV

I lived in a house of panels,
Victorian, darkly made;
A virgin in bronze and marble
Leered from the balustrade.

The street was a tomb of virtues,
Autumnal for dreams and haunts;
I gazed from the polished windows
Toward a neighborhood of aunts.

Mornings I practiced piano,
Wrote elegies and sighed;
The evenings were conversations
Of poetry and suicide.

Weltschmerz and mysticism,
What tortures we undergo!
I loved with the love of Heinrich
And the poison of Edgar Poe.

V

My first small book was nourished in the dark,
Secretly written, published, and inscribed.
Bound in wine-red, it made no brilliant mark.
Rather impossible relatives subscribed.

The best review was one I wrote myself
Under the name of a then-dearest friend.
Two hundred volumes stood upon my shelf
Saying my golden name from end to end.

I was not proud but seriously stirred;
Sorrow was song and money poetry's maid!
Sorrow I had in many a ponderous word,
But were the piper and the printer paid?

VI

The days of my youth were rebels,
Dark-eyed and pale as light.
My house was divided against me
Abstractly, like wrong and right.

I haunted the halls of labor,
To whatever slums I'd roam
My father would come in a Packard
And solemnly drive me home.

I raved like a scarlet banner,
Brave cloth of a single piece,
I learned to despise all uncles,
All Congressmen, all police.

I hated the coin of kindness,
Good deeds of the Octopus;
It was evil to give to beggars
What beggars could give to us.

O comrade of distant Russia,
How difficult for your kind
To live in that even climate
Where no one may change his mind.

VII

The third-floor thoughts of discontented youth
Once saw the city, hardened against truth,
Get set for war. He coupled a last rime
And waited for the summons to end time.

It came. The box-like porch where he had sat,
The four bright boxes of a medium flat,
Chair he had sat in, glider where he lay
Reading the poets and prophets of his day,

He assigned abstractly to his dearest friend,
Glanced at the little street hooked at the end,
The line of poplars lately touched with spring,
Lovely as Laura, breathless, beckoning.

Mother was calm, until he left the door;
The trolley passed his sweetheart's house before
She was awake. The armory was cold,
But naked, shivering, shocked he was enrolled.

It was the death he never quite forgot
Through the four years of death, and like as not
The true death of the best of all of us
Whose present life is largely posthumous.

VIII

For four years stupefied by martial law
The poet in khaki held his tongue. Coward
Or patriot or both, he learned the raw
Truth of the life where only rifles flowered.

His primum mobile was inertia, Fate
As the poor devils called it when they tried
To justify the distance of their state
From that of free men on the civilian side.

The chief hell was stupidity, the vast
And national ignorance of the dividing line
Between the many and the few. He classed
The majority of his fellowmen as swine.

Unlike the others, he revered the bar
And eagle of authority. He loathed
The naked officer and his choice cigar
Yet loved him dutifully when fully clothed.

He seldom doubted that the Cause was just
And did his service with a soldier's sloth.
In his commanders he imposed his trust
—God, he presumed, was on the side of both.

IX

The afternoon lies glazed upon the wall
And on the window shines the scene-like bay,
And on the dark reflective floor a ray
Falls, and my thoughts like ashes softly fall.

And I look up as one who looks through glass
And sees the thing his soul clearly desires,
Who stares until his vision flags and tires,
But from whose eye the image fails to pass;

Until a wish crashes the vitreous air
And comes to your real hands across this space,
Thief-like and deeply cut to touch your face,
Dearly, most bitterly to touch your hair.

And I could shatter these transparent lights,
Could thrust my arms and bring your body through,
Break from the subtle spectrum the last hue
And change my eyes to dark soft-seeing nights.

But the sun stands and the hours stare like brass
And day flows thickly into permanent time,
And toward your eyes my threatening wishes climb
Where you move through a sea of solid glass.

X

I lost my father in a dire divorce,
My father lost I lost my ordered mind
And fell into high Christian intercourse
And face to face came with an ancient force.
To wicked spirits are horrid shapes assigned.

Men died at my feet and iron fell
From nowhere, iron from the zodiac.
One time the python of the oracle
Appeared before my tent.—Immanuel,
Done is a battell on the dragon blak!

I had no joy in any man who thought
Seeing what things the darker eye divined,
But dragged my reason toward the richest-wrought,
Three-towered and Christian-crusted juggernaut.
To wicked spirits are horrid shapes assigned.

Two priests advised me on my rise to grace,
The one among the sacred bric-a-brac
Questioning my devotion to my face,
The other frankly dubious of my race.
Done is a battell on the dragon blak.

I craved the beads and chains of paradise
And counted it a blessing to go blind;
Small truths alone I saw with open eyes
For in the blackest night was my sunrise.
To wicked spirits are horrid shapes assigned.

God's book was in my blood, I was confined
To fifty thousand years upon His rack
And no middle direction could I find.
To wicked spirits are horrid shapes assigned;
Done is a battell on the dragon blak.

XI

We waged a war within a war,
    A cause within a cause;
The glory of it was withheld
    In keeping with the laws
Whereby the public need not know
The pitfalls of the status quo.

Love was the reason for the blood:
    The black men of our land
Were seen to walk with pure white girls
    Laughing and hand in hand.
This most unreasonable state
No feeling White would tolerate.

We threw each other from the trams,
    We carried knives and pipes,
We sacrificed in self-defense
    Some of the baser types,
But though a certain number died
You would not call it fratricide.

The women with indignant tears
    Professed to love the Blacks,
And dark and woolly heads still met
    With heads of English flax.
Only the cockney could conceive
Of any marriage so naïve.

Yet scarcely fifty years before
    Their fathers rode to shoot

The undressed aborigines,
    Though not to persecute.
A fine distinction lies in that
They have no others to combat.

By order of the high command
    The black men were removed
To the interior and north;
    The crisis thus improved,
Even the women could detect
Their awful fall from intellect.

XII

I plucked the bougainvillaea
In Queensland in time of war;
The train stopped at the station
And I reached it from my door.

I have never kept a flower
And this one I never shall
I thought as I laid the blossom
In the leaves of *Les Fleurs du Mal.*

I read my book in the desert
In the time of death and fear,
The flower slipped from the pages
And fell to my lap, my dear.

I sent it inside my letter,
The purplest kiss I knew,
And thus you abused my passion
With "A most Victorian Jew."

XIII

When nuns were spitted and poets fell
And Spain the medieval hell
Became our modern one as well
    And I, a Hamlet, held my tongue,
    Tell me, conscience, was I wrong?

When matters on the Ebro failed
And Cornford died and Campbell railed
And I to my Tahiti sailed
    To ape Loti and Rupert's throng,
    Tell me, conscience, was I wrong?

When Russia smote the sledded Finn
And generals of the French let in
Germans to practice mutual sin,
    And I read Horace all night long,
    Tell me, conscience, was I wrong?

When London like the phoenix burned
And flew in fire and fire returned
And peace beneath the umbrella spurned,
    Did I to either side belong?
    Tell me, conscience, was I wrong?

When dolls in armor from their toys
Scuttled our fleet with frightful noise
And I obeyed the White House voice,
    My best friend was in a prison flung.
    Tell me, conscience, was I wrong?

XIV

"Doctor, doctor, a little of your love
And a little of your skill,
I can no longer sight my gun,
No longer can I kill."

"Soldier, soldier, I cannot find the cause
And I will not set you free,
But take this pill and go your way
To your own company."

"Chaplain, chaplain, a little of your love
And a little of your grace,
I can no longer think my thoughts
Nor bear the demon's face."

"My son, my son, I cannot find the cause
And I will not set you free,
But take this book and go your way
To your own company."

"Captain, captain, a little of your love
And likewise of your loyalty,
I can no longer land at dawn
Nor ride the troopship sea."

"Soldier, soldier, I cannot find the cause
And I will not set you free
But take this leave and go your way
To your own company."

With doctor's pill and chaplain's book
And captain's furlough free,
The soldier went and hanged himself
On a Signal Corps cross-tree.

O soldier, soldier, where now are your eyes
That once so much did see?
The vultures have plucked them from his face
Just over our company.

XV

Millions had wanderlust and toured the seas;
With no rights of the rich, no luggage labels
Sailed on the Queens and Empresses of ships,
Sat, to no manner born, at gilded tables.
Millions who never dreamed of taking trips
Sprawled in the lounge and grand salon at ease.

It was the century of the commonweal
When from the streets and alleys of the West
Horde upon horde debarked at ports of fame,
Poured forth to take possession of the best.
Culture gave way, cathedrals wept for shame
And nowhere was there peace for the genteel.

It was the deluge. Emigrés kissed hands
And fled to London lodgings or, far worse,
Unspiritual New York to plot return.
Chateaux and villas fell before the curse,
Princes took other names, and in their turn
Wan millionaires went weeping from their lands.

And elsewhere, at the witless edge of time,
Millions went wandering on foot too far,
With no more voice, unhelmeted and pale,
Pursued in sleep their endless wanderjahr,
Down to the dark where heated winds prevail
And evil mates with evil in the slime.

XVI

The atheist bride is dressed in blue,
The heretic groom in olive-drab,
The rabbi, of more somber hue,
Arrives upon the scene by cab.

A brief injunction to the pair
With no talk of the demiurge
Gives them the gist of the affair;
They sign the contract and emerge.

The witnesses on silent feet
Follow into the vestry hall;
The English text is short and sweet,
The Hebrew almost not at all.

A tendency to faint concludes
The sacrament. The atmosphere
Heavy with memory extrudes
From every second eye a tear.

A dinner laid for fifty-odd
Takes place in public, with champagne;
The heretic groom assumes the god,
Resists the need to be profane.

The tribal victim dressed in blue
Plans the escape. Disqualified
From the penultimate interview,
No maids of honor bed the bride.

The class that he had always curst
Thus circumvents the angry groom;
He and the atheist, reversed,
Are locked into a hotel room.

The God of the Old Testament
Is locked into the stately ark;
Hymen's attentions are well meant
But marriage happens in the dark.

The Progress of Faust

HOMECOMING

Lost in the vastness of the void Pacific
My thousand days of exile, pain,
Bid me farewell. Gone is the Southern Cross
To her own sky, fallen a continent
Under the wave, dissolved the bitterest isles
In their salt element,
And here upon the deck the mist encloses
My smile that would light up all darkness
And ask forgiveness of the things that thrust
Shame and all death on millions and on me.

We bring no raw materials from the East
But green-skinned men in blue-lit holds
And lunatics impounded between-decks;
The mighty ghoul-ship that we ride exhales
The sickly-sweet stench of humiliation,
And even the majority, untouched by steel
Or psychoneurosis, stare with eyes in rut,
Their hands a rabble to snatch the riches
Of glittering shops and girls.

Because I am angry at this kindness which
Is both habitual and contradictory
To the life of armies, now I stand alone
And hate the swarms of khaki men that crawl
Like lice upon the wrinkled hide of earth,
Infesting ships as well. Not otherwise
Could I lean outward piercing fog to find
Our sacred bridge of exile and return.
My tears are psychological, not poems
To the United States; my smile is prayer.

Gnawing the thin slops of anxiety,
Escorted by the ground swell and by gulls,
In silence and with mystery we enter
The territorial waters. Not till then
Does that convulsive terrible joy, more sudden
And brilliant than the explosion of a ship,
Shatter the tensions of the heaven and sea
To crush a hundred thousand skulls
And liberate in that high burst of love
The imprisoned souls of soldiers and of me.

THE VOYAGE

The ship of my body has danced in the dance of the storm
And pierced to the center the heavy embrace of the tide;
It has plunged to the bottomless trough with the knife of its
form
And leapt with the prow of its motion elate from the bride.

And now in the dawn I am salt with the taste of the wave,
Which lies with itself and suspires, her beauty asleep,
And I peer at the fishes with jaws that devour and rave
And hunt in her dream for the wrack of our hands in the deep.

But the wind is the odor of love that awakes in the sun
The stream of our voyage that lies on the belt of the seas,
And I gather and breathe in the rays of the darkness undone,
And drift in her silence of morning and sail at my ease,

Where the sponges and rubbery seaweeds and flowers of hair
Uprooted abound in the water and choke in the air.

DEMOBILIZATION

Forty-nine men and I stand at attention
In Maryland, at the dead center of peace,
Lean and prepared to give the last salute
And graduate from war. Within this square
I am somewhere but difficult to find,
As in a photograph of graduation
Where youth predominates and looks alive.
Here youth predominates and eyes are veined
And strained. This is the Class of 'Forty-five.

The tattered flag that snaps upon the mast
Like a fine hound upon a leash, the horn
That croaks tired announcements to the wind,
Barracks that split and need a coat of paint,
The exhausted colonel shaking hands with me,
The dusty clouds and rather puzzled sun
All drearily perform. Only the small
Recruits, the babies of no war at all,
Move with an appetite to please and learn.

Dimly it comes to me that this is home,
This is my Maryland, these pines I know,
This camp itself when budding green and raw
I watched in agony of shame. Then quick
To disobey, today it is my law,
The school that coming back to I forgive.
Safe in the pacifism of return
Will I lie down and play the wounded man
And smile at information and drink deep.

There will my wife penelopize and teach
Such love as liquefies adulterous man;
There will my mother often touch my hand
As if my hand were nearly out of reach;
My friends also, sure they have lost a friend,
Will shiftily in conversation span
The years of separation. Less than the same,
Same things will burden every mind, and peace
In the poor victorious logic of our kind

Take form. About me stands the brotherhood
Imposed by tragedy from overhead;
The pattern is about to wrench and break,
And that itself is victory and good.
Let the evilly perfect fifties fall,
Deteriorate into all separate men,
All free, all loyal to themselves, all glad;
Let the smart hand come down, never to rise,
And all who can go back to what they had.

We are running wildly, boys in June, gunmen
Paroled, rabbits let loose, no one to follow!
We fly with the full frenzy of escape
Down highways fallen into disrepair,
Past merchants trading in insignia,
The childish heraldry of grownup war.
Saviors and spies, we seek the road we lost
When kidnapped from indifference. As before,
Back where I started from, I stare, touch wood.

THE CONSCIENTIOUS OBJECTOR

The gates clanged and they walked you into jail
More tense than felons but relieved to find
The hostile world shut out, the flags that dripped
From every mother's windowpane, obscene
The bloodlust sweating from the public heart,
The dog authority slavering at your throat.
A sense of quiet, of pulling down the blind
Possessed you. Punishment you felt was clean.

The decks, the catwalks, and the narrow light
Composed a ship. This was a mutinous crew
Troubling the captains for plain decencies,
A *Mayflower* brim with pilgrims headed out
To establish new theocracies to west,
A Noah's ark coasting the topmost seas
Ten miles above the sodomites and fish.
These inmates loved the only living doves.

Like all men hunted from the world you made
A good community, voyaging the storm
To no safe Plymouth or green Ararat;
Trouble or calm, the men with Bibles prayed,
The gaunt politicals construed our hate.
The opposite of all armies, you were best
Opposing uniformity and yourselves;
Prison and personality were your fate.

You suffered not so physically but knew
Maltreatment, hunger, ennui of the mind.

Well might the soldier kissing the hot beach
Erupting in his face damn all your kind.
Yet you who saved neither yourselves nor us
Are equally with those who shed the blood
The heroes of our cause. Your conscience is
What we come back to in the armistice.

AN URN OF ASHES

I bring an urn of ashes for all those
Who come into the presence of love's death
To be unmarried and to curse the rose
That swore so beautifully to live the years.
What god is there with large eyes of dismay
Who broods over the death of marriages?

Alas, there is no god, but a bare judge,
The scholar of dry perjury who leafs
Through books of yellow buckram to discern
Old woes and precedents of woes;
This is the man who manumits our souls
And knows that laws are never to the rose.

Neither the god's priest, mealy-mouthed and suave,
Nor the sad god of divorce can really save
These people. Angrily opposed they stand
And put between them the slick table top.
They are like heirs assembled in a room
To hear the dreadful treatise of a will.

Until from the dry lips of the learned man
There falls a stale flat flower of the law,
Some old kiss pressed into a book of torts
That got there by a foolish sentiment.
This is awarded to the wife.
The husband is awarded a blunt knife.

Nervously now he does what he is told

—To plunge the instrument into her life,
And that is all. They separate, they live,
At first in rooms with covered mirrors, then
In bright apartments where the newness hides
An urn of ashes in a plaster cope.

IN THE WAXWORKS

At midday when the light rebukes the world,
Searching the seams of faces, cracks of walls
And each fault of the beautiful,
Seized by a panic of the street I fled
Into a waxworks where the elite in crime
And great in fame march past in fixed parade.
How pale they were beneath their paint, how pure
The monsters gleaming from the cubicles!

When, as in torsion, I beheld
These malformations of the evil mind
I grew serene and seemed to fall in love,
As one retiring to a moving picture
Or to a gallery of art. I saw
The basest plasm of the human soul
Here turned to sculpture, fingering,
Kissing, and corrupting life.

So back and forth among the leers of wax
I strutted for the idols of the tribe,
Aware that I was on display, not they,
And that I had come down to pray,
As one retires to a synagogue
Or to a plaster saint upon the wall.
Why were these effigies more dear to me
Than haughty manikins in a window-shop?

I said a rosary for the Presidents
And fell upon my knees before
The Ripper and an exhibit of disease

Revolting more in its soft medium
Than in the flesh. I stroked a prince's hand,
Leaving a thumbprint in the palm. I swore
Allegiance to the suicide whose wrists
Of tallow bled with admirable red.

Why were these images more dear to me
Than faïence dolls or gods of smooth Pentelikon?
Because all statuary turns to death
And only half-art balances.
The fetish lives, idolatry is true,
The crude conception of the putrid face
Sticks to my heart. This criminal in wan
Weak cerement of translucent fat

Is my sweet saint. O heretic, O mute,
When broils efface the Metropolitan
And swinish man from some cloaca creeps
Or that deep midden, his security,
Coming to you in brutish admiration
May he look soft into your eyes;
And you, good wax, may you not then despise
Our sons and daughters, fallen apes.

THE SOUTHERNER

He entered with the authority of politeness
And the jokes died in the air. A well-made blaze
Grew round the main log in the fireplace
Spontaneously. I watched its brightness
Spread to the altered faces of my guests.
They did not like the Southerner. I did.
A liberal felt that someone should forbid
That soft voice making its soft arrests.

As when a Negro or a prince extends
His hand to an average man, and the mind
Speeds up a minute and then drops behind,
So did the conversation of my friends.
I was amused by this respectful awe
Which those hotly deny who have no prince.
I watched the frown, the stare, and the wince
Recede into attention, the arms thaw.

I saw my southern evil memories
Raped from my mind before my eyes, my youth
Practicing caste, perfecting the untruth
Of staking honor on the wish to please.
I saw my honor's paradox:
Grandpa, the saintly Jew, keeping his beard
In difficult Virginia, yet endeared
Of blacks and farmers, although orthodox.

The nonsense of the gracious lawn,
The fall of hollow columns in the pines,
Do these deceive more than the rusted signs

Of Jesus on the road? Can they go on
In the timeless manner of all gentlefolk
There in a culture rotted and unweeded
Where the black yoni of the South is seeded
By crooked men in denims thin as silk?

They do go on, denying still the fall
Of Richmond and man, who gently live
On the street above the violence, fugitive,
Graceful, and darling, who recall
The heartbroken country once about to flower,
Full of black poison, beautiful to smell,
Who know how to conform, how to compel,
And how from the best bush to receive a flower.

D. C.

The bad breed of the natives with their hates
That border on a Georgian night,
The short vocabulary, the southern look
That writes a volume on your past, the men
Freeholders of the city-state, the women
Polite for murder—these happen to be;
The rest arrive and never quite remain.

The rest live with an easy homelessness
And common tastelessness, their souls
Weakly lit up blazing screens and tales
Told by a newspaper. Holidays the vast
Basilicas of the railroad swallow up
Hundreds of thousands, struggling in the tide
For home, the one identity and past.

The noble riches keep themselves, the miles
Of marble breast the empty wind,
The halls of books and pictures manufacture
Their deep patinas, the fountains coldly splash
To the lone sailor, the boulevards stretch out
Farther than Arlington, where all night long
One living soldier marches for the dead.

Only the very foreign, the very proud,
The richest and the very poor
Hid in their creepy purlieus white or black
Adore this whole Augustan spectacle,
And chancelleries perceive the porch of might
Surmounted by the dome in which there lies
No Bonaparte, no Lenin, but a floor.

Yet those who govern live in quaintness, close
In the Georgian ghetto of the best;
What was the simplest of the old becomes
The exquisite palate of the new. Their names
Are admirals and paternalists, their ways
The ways of Lee who, having lost the slaves,
Died farther south, a general in the wrong.

BOY-MAN

England's lads are miniature men
To start with, grammar in their shiny hats,
And serious: in America who knows when
Manhood begins? Presidents dance and hug
And while the kind King waves and gravely chats
America wets on England's old green rug.

The boy-man roars. Worry alone will give
This one the verisimilitude of age.
Those white teeth are his own, for he must live
Longer, grow taller than the Texas race.
Fresh are his eyes, his darkening skin the gauge
Of bloods that freely mix beneath his face.

He knows the application of the book
But not who wrote it; shuts it like a shot.
Rather than read he thinks that he will look,
Rather than look he thinks that he will talk,
Rather than talk he thinks that he will not
Bother at all; would rather ride than walk.

His means of conversation is the joke,
Humor his language underneath which lies
The undecoded dialect of the folk.
Abroad he scorns the foreigner: what's old
Is worn, what's different bad, what's odd unwise.
He gives off heat and is enraged by cold.

Charming, becoming to the suits he wears,
The boy-man, younger than his eldest son,
Inherits the state; upon his silver hairs

Time like a panama hat sits at a tilt
And smiles. To him the world has just begun
And every city waiting to be built.

Mister, remove your shoulder from the wheel
And say this prayer, "Increase my vitamins,
Make my decisions of the finest steel,
Pour motor oil upon my troubled spawn,
Forgive the Europeans for their sins,
Establish them, that values may go on."

THE AUNT

The aunt that binds her bosoms in her wrath
Is now completely covered. Never again
Shall she go naked, even in her bath,
And she shall switch the uncovered girl of ten,

And scald the teapot twice and puff at dust,
Lifting the China vase, her egg-shell soul;
On the white skin of her inverted lust
Wear charity as a deacon wears his stole.

As if in rage the blood has left her lips,
She stuffs with straw her buttocks and her thighs
And squats down on the broomstick of her hips,

More hideous than disease. O Christian hag!
Are these the vestments of your last disguise,
An old hat in a field, a flapping rag?

AIR LINER

Man has devised his ugliest claptrap
In this machine; a boxcar with a wing,
A wing in which lie bolted and concealed
Two automobiles or four. Electric fans
Of monstrous size project. Up in the nose
The pilot squats, the brain of the insect.
The rudder, most ridiculous fin, sticks up
Behind, a kind of billboard. Nothing fits.

But suddenly the fans are on, a gale
Begins beneath the wheels. Pivoting
We gawk and turkey-trot to the wide road
Laid out for this, and pausing, gather strength
For the grand leap. The earth flows to a blur,
The senses roar and, multiplying might,
Lean to the onrush, tilting up the tail,
Straining to lift us, blunder us upstairs.

Without delay we fly. The bottom drops
Out of the world and houses shrink to scale;
River and town slow to a walking pace,
Nursery objects, models for a war
Upon a general's table. —Why are we bored?
Why is it nothing new? And is there no
Sensation of the height? It's getting cold,
It slips, it skids, it bumps us like a truck.

Outside the wind is pulling bits of cloud
From infinite wool fields. Suddenly we are blind,
Wrapped in cocoons of nothingness far over
The ever-lost, the ever-wished-for earth.

Our boxcar drifts from time, and in the front
A small door opens and reveals a man
At a typewriter, writing what, to whom?
Soon we must die or plunge to death or freeze.

One with his dials and clocks is hauling us
Like fools around the firmament, and one
Sits at a sky desk writing. Both are mad,
Both are the baggage men of our good souls.
And yet we trust these young and lunatic
Mechanics with our lives, who should have been
Bus drivers shifting gears from street to street,
Nodding good morning, chewing, making change.

O reap the brilliants of the sky and climb,
Truck-driver poet! Your secret name I know,
You and your awkward bird with gilded beak,
Your pitiable unbending hawk, your iron
Soaring eagle. Man with the strength of hand
To hold these tons of flesh and steel aloft,
You are the white Icarian arm of man's
Escape from man into the electric Sun.

WORDS FOR A CHILD'S BIRTHDAY

Finally I understand the meaning of birthdays,
who somewhere in my teens despaired
of celebrating the passing of time,
the fuss of the hour, the momentary blaze
of attention. Then I was unprepared
to stop for events: on the other hand must climb
to where events were far away and dead
and finally the eye could rest
clearly above and see time spread
nicely below, the world made whole and manifest.

Because you were born this day a year ago
I understand the passing of time
and will try to arrest it, and thank God
that this one year was wonderful and slow,
bringing you to the very prime
of infancy. Learning your seventh word
and your seventh step you have already crossed
millions of years of intelligence,
time forever and never lost
to the angels and apes who gave you this pre-eminence.

I write this down as if you could understand
the silly motivations of fathers
or the cause of words or the click of night.
I write you from an older wonderland
where colors tire and dust gathers
on even favorite works. My troglodyte,
my fish fished out of darkness by a scream,

do you prefer dry land to the warm
salt mother-ocean of your dream
in which you swam to learn your perfect final form?

I note you do. Human by leaps and bounds,
each day you lose a little love
for night, just as the aged lose
a little love for day. Yes, you have grounds
for waking like a cock to prove
that day is ready. Wake then and accuse,
wake and demand and shake your little jail,
drive the groggy giants in,
wag the dragons by the tail
until the world and time rattle like brilliant tin!

Then have no reverence for the different two,
the agents, feeders, bodyguards
of your survival and your play
who grow serious merely by owning you,
straining like twin camelopards
over your life, and turning slightly gray—
composite spirit and sprite, subliminal,
seminal, recently fish, pig,
frog, snake, germ, physical
thought, but finally daughter, beautiful, startling, big.

THE CONVERT

Deep in the shadowy bethel of the tired mind,
Where spooks and death lights ride, and Marys, too,
Materialize like senseless ectoplasm
Smiling in blue, out of the blue,
Quite gradually, on a common afternoon,
With no more inner fanfare than a sigh,
With no cross in the air, drizzle of blood,
Beauty of blinding voices from up high,
The man surrenders reason to the ghost
And enters church, via the vestry room.

The groan of positive science, hiss of friends,
Substantiate what doctors call
His rather shameful and benign disease,
But ecumenical heaven clearly sees
His love, his possibilities.
O victory of the Unintelligence,
What mystic rose developing from rock
Is more a miracle than this overthrow?
What Constitution ever promised more
Than his declared insanity?

Yet he shall be less perfect than before,
Being no longer neutral to the Book
But answerable. What formerly were poems,
Precepts, and commonplaces now are laws,
Dantean atlases, and official news.
The dust of ages settles on his mind
And in his ears he hears the click of beads

Adding, adding, adding like a prayer machine
His heartfelt sums. Upon his new-found knees
He treasures up the gold of never-ending day.

All arguments are vain——that Notre Dame
Has plumbing, Baptists shoot their fellowmen,
Hindus are pious, nuns have Cadillacs;
Apologetics anger him who is
The living proof of what he newly knows;
And proudly sorrowing for those who fail
To read his simple summa theologica,
He prays that in the burning they be spared,
And prays for mercy as the south wind blows,
And for all final sins that tip the scale.

Peace on a hundred thousand temples falls
With gently even light, revealing some
With wounded walls and missing faces, some
Spared by the bombardier, and some by God.
In mournful happiness the clerics move
To put the altars back, and the new man,
Heartbroken, walks among the broken saints,
Thinking how heavy is the hand that hates,
How light and secret is the sign of love
In the time of many significant conversions.

THE PROGRESS OF FAUST

He was born in Deutschland, as you would suspect,
And graduated in magic from Cracow
In Fifteen Five. His portraits show a brow
Heightened by science. The eye is indirect,
As of bent light upon a crooked soul,
And that he bargained with the Prince of Shame
For pleasures intellectually foul
Is known by every court that lists his name.

His frequent disappearances are put down
To visits in the regions of the damned
And to the periodic deaths he shammed,
But, unregenerate and in Doctor's gown,
He would turn up to lecture at the fair
And do a minor miracle for a fee.
Many a life he whispered up the stair
To teach the black art of anatomy.

He was as deaf to angels as an oak
When, in the fall of Fifteen Ninety-four,
He went to London and crashed through the floor
In mock damnation of the playgoing folk.
Weekending with the scientific crowd,
He met Sir Francis Bacon and helped draft
"Colours of Good and Evil" and read aloud
An obscene sermon at which no one laughed.

He toured the Continent for a hundred years
And subsidized among the peasantry
The puppet play, his tragic history;

With a white glove he boxed the devil's ears
And with a black his own. Tired of this,
He published penny poems about his sins,
In which he placed the heavy emphasis
On the white glove which, for a penny, wins.

Some time before the hemorrhage of the Kings
Of France, he turned respectable and taught;
Quite suddenly everything that he had thought
Seemed to grow scholars' beards and angels' wings.
It was the Overthrow. On Reason's throne
He sat with the fair Phrygian on his knees
And called all universities his own,
As plausible a figure as you please.

Then back to Germany as the sages' sage
To preach comparative science to the young
Who came from every land in a great throng
And knew they heard the master of the age.
When for a secret formula he paid
The Devil another fragment of his soul,
His scholars wept, and several even prayed
That Satan would restore him to them whole.

Backwardly tolerant, Faustus was expelled
From the Third Reich in Nineteen Thirty-nine.
His exit caused the breaching of the Rhine,
Except for which the frontier might have held.
Five years unknown to enemy and friend
He hid, appearing on the sixth to pose
In an American desert at war's end
Where, at his back, a dome of atoms rose.

Trial of a Poet

In seeking just occasion to provoke
The *Philistine,* thy Countries Enemy,
Thou never wast remiss, I bear thee witness:
Yet *Israel* still serves with all his Sons.

MILTON

PERSONS

Poet
Public Officer
Doctor
Priest
Chorus of Poets

Chorus. Great among us in stirring days
And prolific in leaves, with leaf-like beauties
Shed from windows of spirit high over
The flat United States, the banal States
Bound up and down with rails, he was a tower
Of innumerable images and congregations of wings
That chattered and sang of foreign journeys
With what enchantment, what confidence
Breezing among the brickwork of forgotten gardens
And ambassadorial chateaux;
Sending us postcards and Catullian epigrams
In our own dialects. Great as an equal
He sat down with masters, he furthered them
In heroic efforts, indefatigably seeking
What the age demanded
And finding the forms that the age deserved.

Is this that man so broken,
Sitting now in a plain chair, slumped over,
With lowered eyes and beard unpointed,
Scarcely breathing, like an old man whose blood
Circles too quietly in a tired body,
Causing the guard to scan his coat
For the slightest sign of motion?
Hold a mirror to the poet's breath!
No, it is not death, only exhaustion;
All that energy is stilled within;
His mind drifts in twilight sleep,
Listlessly following a stray word or a flower
Or some old thought in ancient tongue
Or the jagged fragment of a poem. A weight
Pulls down his eyelids, sad crumpled poet,

But he has found dignity and tragedy
In the failure of crime. Much like an ecstatic
He floats out of reach into other depths of awareness
Where not a bell nor a shout,
Not a pardon nor an extreme question
Shall now arouse and return him. I think
Nevertheless that he is not yet empty
And will speak up, or perhaps his thoughts
Have fallen through bad flooring and lie hurt
Down there in the dark, unable to move.

Priest. May his imbalance be corrected in
The middle ear, and may
The balls of his feet return him to
The right angles of his knees.

Doctor. May his faith in neighborly benevolence
Temper his satanic malevolence;
May the beat of Biblical wings
Fan him to altitudes of starlike clarity.

Public Officer. May he not be abducted
By doctor or priest before
His Honor has penetrated the door.

Chorus. And may he escape the interest of these
Who are professionally interested
In the outcome of the atypical man.

Public Officer. Are we agreed that the crime was committed?

All. We are.

Public Officer. Have we defined the character of the crime?

All. To ourselves we have.

Public Officer. But to the world have not, for simple treason
Has never had one hair's extenuation
But is pure death, admired in its form
As higher than espionage
Or black assassination.
Treason is patriotism of a sort,
Of a sad sort, is loyalty become
Wrong-headed, as blasphemy of God
Is wrong-headed religion.
For treason has no trial, no form of trial
But only the valediction of judges
Who sit, out of politeness to the Law,
But really take the measure of the hangman.
If this were treason of the common school,
The Priest, the prisoner and the kindly Chorus
Could all adjourn to the cell block
And the doctor go to his rounds.

Chorus. What stand shall we take who abhor the deed,
Rightly hateful of high treason or low,
As of murder, rape, intent to subvert the canons
Of government or youthful mind
Or our sacred safety
Wrested time and again from the sea?
We hardly know what stand. The poet broods
In illhealth and darkness
Far from the desks of legislators,
Far from the stage of justice,
And he lacks the cue and the technique for crime
And even makes a foolish soldier
Because of his hesitancy to hurt.
But let us not generalize to his disadvantage

Or reduce him to a technical imbecile,
For poets are as various as men and have

Nothing in common but their poems. Yet when treason
Tries the door of the nation and we turn
To find a man of music and soul,
We are baffled and our minds are divided
Between the enormity of the act
And our sentimentality, between our heart's wish
And our tied hands. Thus we become
Like children in a nightmare on a dead street
Who hear a monster behind and cannot scream.

Priest. What is the character of the crime but madness?
For poets at this hour are demon-ridden,
Pseudo-prophetic and accusatory,
Pseudo-accusatory and very prophetic.
They dabble in forgotten tongues,
They employ the Chaldee and other hieratics,
And emulate the philology of Babel.
Great amateurs of evil, men of the world,
Great friends of the devil and the half-world
They climb down walls to dampness and rot
For a game of barter,
A hair for a sin, a hair for a sin.
And the calm iron-gray honorable poets who dwell in towers
Traffic indecently with midwives and mediums
For the old rubbish of lore
Or a chance key or a polluted letter.

Doctor. Genius is the character of the crime
I have no doubt. Genius must break the law
As Columbus broke the egg.
Genius is man in advance, is therefore mad
Because he pushes darkness over the edge of the world.
We do not like the law broken
Even when the law is palpably absurd,
And even when the law is acknowledged nonsense

We clap genius in irons and send him home to rot;
We pay him with darkness for the light he shed.
That is why genius is with us today.
He did not discover that the world was round
Or that the sun stands still or the blood moves;
All he discovered was a form of verse
That suited and excited the experts in these questions.
Yet it appears he felt it as a crime
Because he fought for his innovation
Like a possessed man, as the Priest puts it.
Out of his new-found phrases and dead footnotes
He wove a critique of life, a bad world history,
With a Cloud-Cuckoo-Land for his heroes
And a hell in minute detail for the rest.
I think we must find the bridge between
This harmless sublimation and his consummate crime.

Public Officer. The Doctor has given us a valuable lead
And authorization, as it were,
To proceed with the definition of the crime
Which, in my opinion, he puts a liberal
Gentlemanly construction upon.
The character of the crime is style itself.
The style is in the crime and vice versa,
Inseparably and with a common genesis,
Because the style of pure repudiation
Destroys the sense of balance in nature
By which we stand, by which we dance,
And the inner and overall idea of balance
Is the pale reflection of a godly design.
All nature is a thoughtful harmony
Of thoughtful forms, and many learned minds declare
A love-like force behind the constellations,
A fatherly force in flakes of snow,
As in the dots that raise a dreaded disease,

Or the flinging of comets and lights.
Then what is this puny criticism of the style
That manufactured forests and seas;
What is this blasphemy of natural form
Except the treason of forms and anti-style?

Priest. What will our children's children say
About our art-monsters in future years
When Christian quiet relaxes the nations
And, as in the sunburst of the Renaissance,
Paint shall be gorgeous and, I hope, holy?
Then tourists wandering in museums we called modern
Will stop thunderstruck at the sight of love
With her badly broken face, of a misbegotten Aphrodite,
And smooth womanhood deliberately roughened;
All our demented fragmented masterpieces
Founded on a strong nostalgia for savage crudities.
What can they possibly deduce from our plans
And sketches which we obviously preferred
To the finished product of a decent ideal
From which we began and worked backwards?

Chorus. Whether art is a dawdling mirror,
Whether art is an eidolon
Superior to the perceived arrangements
Of waves that strike the five shores of the mind
Is immaterial.
Whether the poem is revealed or forced,
The result mechanical or purely spontaneous
Is immaterial and of minor interest to me.
You always ask for identifications,
You ask for expensive ingredients,
A cloth much less coarse than canvas,
Granite softer than soapstone,
Words that melt in your mouth.

How can we demonstrate to the officials
That canvas is as fine as silk, and that in any case
We are doomed to the uses of our own economy?
Many are cultivated in the view
That art is long and nothing new under the sun
Except the wheels and eyes of science,
But when the future returns to examine us
And talk about our awkward remains,
I hope they will find us guilty of facing
The age we helped to construct.
I trust they will know the facts concerning
The barbarous century we inherited.
Only then will they conclude that no poem
Except the prisoner's and his disciples'
Was true to our situation. We live in crisis,
We breathe crisis, and do not see the end of crisis.
Let the liars smooth our arts,
Let the liars versify
In true iamb, falling trochee,
Elegant choriamb and brittle brittanic.

Public Officer. I am reminded of that bad decade
Of hyperconscious wakefulness
Born amid cheers in Paris and that died
In petrified New York by its own hand,
Leaving the evening's tickertape unread,
The morning's crosswordpuzzle incomplete.
Then our whores for culture swarmed
Across the Rhine, following fallen money,
Our girls with hips like boys,
Our boys with hips like girls,
Whose lostness found them the grace of gangsters,
Sex without sin and movies in reverse,
Who loved the ugly beauty of the painted cube,
Who thought that art is squeezed out of a tube,

Who broke every record of love and speed
And sitting in a tree and dancing in handcuffs.
And that decade fell down
For an overwrought design and blood heated
By a dead lover in a million-dollar hearse,
By fiction-loving eyes
Fixed on a graph of soaring gold,
By writers of pornography and free verse.

Priest. I am reminded of the next decade
When treason wore a political face
And the poet could be found irresponsibly spilling
The blood of mothers and the bricks of the church.
In many countries previously sacred to tradition
This happened; a devilish dialectic
Sprang to their lips and spat from rifles,
And poems were floated on little red sheets
Of butcher paper in ditches and trenches
Sticky with loss of life and love.

Chorus. We admit what you say; we worked and accused,
We took on ourselves the calls of conscience.
It came to us when the priests stumbled
And kings and presidents mumbled and failed.
If not us, who? If not missionaries and cranks,
If not the eccentric, the insulted, the poor,
Who would accuse and alter
The fatalism of inferior habits?
We inherited causes, we inherited sides,
Some of us went to the left, some to the right,
Some to a prearranged paradise,
Some to a desired purgatory;
Angels up and down the ladder,
Devils up and down the ropes,
But there was a sign among us, high or low,

That cut across temporal loyalties
And walked erect among opposing armies:
This was avoidance of public promotion
By a corrupt public whose brute pleasures
Everybody knows; the sign to escape
The public snorting at our heels
Always just one generation behind
But close enough to terrorize and kill.

Doctor. This is all terribly academic and idle
And a deadlock in the bargain. My power, it appears,
Supersedes that of the court and that of the church
And certainly that of a circle of poets.
There was a time when the king was the right
And a long yawn from a royal throat
Would drop a life into the gullet of death.
Again there was a time when the many were the right
And the head of a king would loll in a basket.
Still again and we had an orderly time
When a dozen medium minds decided
The fate of murder, over a deck of cards.
There was even a period when the right was God
And a priest in black mail rode to the hunt
Of witches and Jews,
While the dry dogs of the Lord deployed
With golden chains, and the faggots clacked
And the scrolls of smoke unwound the flesh of heretics.
But a truly humane procedure crowns
These childhood memories; it is the doctor's art
That is the supreme court of modern man
And on my say, as on the say of science
All life depends, that life depends.
Therefore, unless by decent persuasion
We can bring back our poet from silence,
This cruel and moral comedy shall be dismissed.

[*The Public Officer addresses the Poet.*]

Public Officer. If you will be sane, technically or really,
I will offer you your life
And a limited freedom,
A good workable liberty in
A highly convenient and up-to-date jail.
There you shall have books and paper
And no hard labor;
Your cell shall be contiguous to
A garden or at the least an open farm.
Visitors will be permitted upon your request
And you shall be less prisoner than guest.
But upon condition that you properly divulge
The actual character of your crime,
The names and numbers of your accomplices
And the means whereby
You sought through poetry
To undermine and overwhelm society.

[*The Priest addresses the Poet.*]

Priest. I blow upon your eyes,
I blow upon your mouth,
Breathing the air of life into the possessed.
I blow upon your right ear,
I blow upon your left. O Lord,
Drive from this poet all blindness of heart,
Break the bonds of hell that tie him,
Preserve him from the infection of vices
And waken him, as from deafness and dumbness.
Ephphetha, that is, be opened for an odor of sweetness,
And as for thee, Devil, begone.

"My son, your life is over and done
And a new and longer life will shortly begin
Either in light or in darkness, but equally forever.
Arise, be comforted, be whole;
Pour out the pus of your spirit
Upon the ground; vomit up death
And stand forth as the unborn child,
Not as the burning babe flung like a torch
Into inconceivable hell.
But lift your head and show your eyes
To receive tranquillity and to exchange
Good health for a life of the invalid eternal.
Your polluted soul is your grim disease
And to its ravages I am miraculous medicine.

[*The Doctor addresses the Poet.*]

Doctor. He is deeper down than damnation,
He has turned into thought, the fool,
Who might have been a wonderful instrument
For the recapitulation of cultural data
Predating the Mahabharata.
Shall I try sugar-shock or electricity
Or confer with the Priest for a thumbscrew?
There is something to the crazy theologian
Despite his barbaric terminology
And his criminal exploitation of the sick.
Like the old crone who dabbled in foxglove
He knows a little about heart cures.
I'll use a cheese injection and grow mold
To block the flow of the Humour.
Summum bonum medicinae sanitas.
To God? He loves thee not.
Then stab thy arm courageously!

[*He injects a fluid into the Poet.*]

Chorus. Behind their ineffable masks
The prostitutes perform
The rigid prologue of a tragedy,
But what is the use of knowledge that has no end
But the end of increasing knowledge?
What is the end of specialization but death?
What is the use of law in the letter
That cannot fit the four dimensions of man?
The Priest is between the science and the law,
But who is there to represent ourselves but ourselves
And to elevate man high over knowledge,
The science of right, the art of good.
For slippery Plato's insidious perfection
Must question whether Homer gave us laws,
Did any public service, taught, invented,
Navigated a ship or fought a battle.
Efficient is the hypocrisy of the man
Who places the State before the man,
The law before the man, the knowledge of man
Before the man, and his after-life before
His one rememberable life.
Poet, awake, and tell these figureheads
The true sense of your treason;
Tell them the sense of your silence, isolation,
Place your sacrifice upon our hands
That we may satisfy your flesh for the deed
And purify our intentions.
Say you were sent by us as a scout
To explore the ore of the horror ahead,
Confess your hope for expiation and immolation,
The desire to burn rapidly
While nations rapidly went to cinders
And science took off in a trial balloon for the moon,

While churches removed their roofs to expose
Their inner workings to crows,
And the law began to edit itself
Like a man of a single poem.
Say you were the man without a country
Who carried a flag in his heart pocket,
But awake and put a construction on the deed,
Or to your death and our eternal discredit
We shall be convicted, and all be stained.

[*The Poet awakes.*]

Poet. "On the one hand, the replication against ignorant "persons. On the other hand, my rough-hewn clowterly verse, "interlarded with fiddle-faddle comedy, apocryphal matter, un- "filed expressions, swirling phrases, hard metaphors, forced pe- "riods, rants, and especially impious rants, the remarks and "eternal triflings of French grammaticasters, and the rash igno- "rance of every single-sheeted pie-corner poet who comes squirting "out an elegy. On the one hand, those who versify the depured "rhetoric and condemn strange inkborn terms. On the other "hand, those who powder their talk with strange oversea lan- "guage. On the one hand, those of the view that our tongue "should be written clean and pure, unmixed and unmingled "with the borrowing of other tongues, minus the neighing of the "horse and the howling of the mastiff. On the other hand, those "who hunt more after words than matter, more after the choice- "ness of the phrase and the round and clean composition of the "sentence, and the sweet falling of the clauses, and the varying "and illustration of their words with tropes and figures, than after "the weight of matter, worth of subject, soundness of argument, "life of invention, or depth of judgment. On the one hand, those "on the one hand. On the other hand, those who contend that it "is impossible to remain too long in the theater."

Public Officer. Who will interpret this jabber and Greek,
The tag-ends of a demented criticism
Told by a critic condemned to labor
Among the ruins of deposed ideas?
You poets who stand aside
In mutual sympathy, admiring yourselves
In the fall of one of your numbers,
What do you see in the cracked mirror
Of an old man's eyes,
In the wild whips of a hydra's hundred
Vocabularies of froth and filth?

Priest. They see the glazed mosaic of a saint
Most ancient and most highly styled.

Doctor. The flotsam and jetsam of an epic dream
Interpreted in a howling wind
On the shores of sinking Atlantis.

Chorus. We hear the voice of a trapped young man,
The single note of a critic of time
Whispering through the chalky air
Of a bombed house on a quiet street.
He was lying in bed in a comfortable light
And reading of some adventure when it happened.
Then the floor sank, and he with it.

Poet. "While the historian and the philosopher are advanc-
"ing in, and accelerating, the progress of knowledge, the poet is
"wallowing in the rubbish of departed ignorance, and raking up
"the ashes of dead savages to find gewgaws and rattles for the
"grown babies of the age. Mr. A. digs up the poachers and cattle
"stealers of the ancient border. Mr. B. cruises for thieves and pi-
"rates on the shores of the Morea and among the Greek islands.
"Mr. C. wades through ponderous volumes of travels and old

"chronicles, from which he carefully selects all that is false, use-
"less and absurd, as being essentially poetical; and when he has
"a commonplace book full of monstrosities strings them into an
"epic. Mr. D. picks up village legends from old women and sex-
"tons; and Mr. E., to the valuable information acquired from
"similar sources, superadds the dreams of crazy theologians and
"the mysticisms of German metaphysics, and favors the world
"with visions in verse, in which the quadruple elements of sex-
"ton, old woman, Jeremy Taylor and Emmanuel Kant are har-
"monized into a delicious poetical compound."

Chorus. The floor sank and the firemen came
And soaked the ruins of a sizable library
In the middle of which, a ludicrous sight,
The poet sat in the sodden pulp and wept.
So he rose and went out into the night
And committed a crime to which he was committed
From an old sense of injured dignity.

Poet. "A poet in our times is a semibarbarian in a civilized
"community. He lives in the days that are past. The march of his
"intellect is like that of a crab, backward. The highest inspira-
"tions of poetry are resolvable into three ingredients: the rant of
"unregulated passion, the whine of exaggerated feeling, and the
"cant of factitious sentiment: and can therefore serve only to
"ripen a splendid lunatic like Mr. F., a puling driveler like Mr.
"G., or a morbid dreamer like Mr. H. It can never make a
"philosopher, nor a statesman, nor in any class of life a useful or
"rational man. To read the promiscuous rubbish of the present
"time to the exclusion of the select treasures of the past, is to
"substitute the worse for the better variety of the same mode of
"enjoyment. When we consider that the great and permanent
"interests of human society become more and more the main
"spring of intellectual pursuit; that in proportion as they become

"so, the subordinacy of the ornamental to the useful will be more "and more seen and acknowledged, and that therefore the prog- "ress of useful art and science, and of moral and political knowl- "edge, will continue more and more to withdraw attention from "frivolous and unconducive, to solid and conducive studies: that "therefore the poetical audience will not only continually di- "minish in the proportion of its number to that of the rest of the "reading public, but will also sink lower and lower in the com- "parison of intellectual acquirement: we may easily conceive that "the day is not distant, when the degraded state of every species "of poetry will be as generally recognized as that of dramatic "poetry has long been—as if there were no such things in exist- "ence as mathematicians, astronomers, chemists, moralists, meta- "physicians, historians, politicians, and political economists."

Chorus. If this were so, if this were so,
What poet could rule, rule or destroy,
For to a great extent we have expressed
The rule of destruction common to rulers,
Moralists, economists, astronomers
And those who perform the law.
It is time we confessed aloud
That we adored the backward crab
Since there was permitted no other icon.
Therefore we appointed this man to crawl
On the rubbery floor of the sea, under the wall
Where everything after a certain age
Must crumble silently.
We appointed this man to the careful scrutiny
Of downfall and disaster, to report
By analogy something of ours.
We knew that treason was a probability
But said nothing and hardly ever murmured
A word on the subject to our own souls.

Poet of our conscience, tell us what you know
About ourselves, the softness within
Where you were driven with a hazel wand
To probe the mastoid and to puncture
The bad heart of the panting flapping mammoth.

[*The Poet takes the Judge's bench.*]

Poet. Naturally, this is not an easy role for me. You ask me in the time of the judge's absence to fill the shoes of a man trained to these questions, and whose terminology is the shorthand of ages of experience in justice. So I am going to say precisely what I mean, without overtones of irony, cynicism or allegory; I am not here to protect or discriminate against the prisoner but to understand the interplay of asides contributed by the three protagonists and the Chorus.

I will take the Priest first. I was rather struck with the medical figures of speech which he used in his opening lines; I thought this a little odd but put it down to a show of friendliness for the Doctor; perhaps he was making a bid for support. It is certainly not unheard of, at any rate, for religion to make use of the apologies of science, and vice versa, and anyone can see that an entente between these forces would nowadays make a formidable team. This is why the Priest considers madness a crime and the crime madness; for without the guidance of either holy authority or the detached curiosity for the classification of knowledge which is the sole characteristic of the inquiry into the nature of things, the prisoner becomes a prey to magic, the bastard offspring of science and prayer. Carrying the Priest's point to its logical conclusion, we can see that in effect he condemns all poetry, but as is usual in questions of this kind, he makes a discreet distinction between essence and substance.

I think the prisoner would agree with him that the poetry of hell is the most satisfying genre we have ever hit upon and

that the best poets have frequently expressed the wish to live at the pitch of frenzy.

Therefore I was truly disappointed to hear the holy man launch into his diatribe against "'modern art," a speech which obviously belonged in the mouth of the Public Officer, and which, in my opinion, the Priest did not believe a single word of. I suppose these are the tactics of all spokesmen who are obliged to phrase every public utterance in such a way that it will appear to express the will of the many while satisfying the hidden demands of the enlightened.—I pass over his words about Spain and come to the exorcism.

To expel the demon from poetry is certainly one way of rendering it impotent, yet the Priest knows that this is about as likely, if not the same thing as abolishing evil itself. Also, the good riddance of evil in poetry would be tantamount to the destruction of a vital part of the life motive. Consequently, I can only conclude that the Priest is praying for the prisoner's death; by baptizing him he hands him the harp, and perhaps symbolically puts a curse on all future poetics. Poetry as an independent faith he knows to be dangerous.—Fortunately the poet comes to his senses, and the spell of the Priest is canceled out.

The Doctor next. His opening pronouncement is slightly bemused but understandable for a man in his position. The Doctor has labored for centuries to extend life and to relieve pain, yet in the process he has brought into existence many new and terrifying arts of killing. I mean that for every year he has added to the life span, he has subtracted a hundred; for every life he has saved, he has destroyed millions. Naturally, he is on the verge of a nervous collapse and leans almost perceptibly to the Priest's side.

Can we expect him to do otherwise than to defend genius in the old-fashioned manner? Genius, he must still assert, pushes darkness over the edge of the world, although no one knows better than the Doctor that genius can just as easily push the

world over the edge of darkness. He understands why the prisoner felt a certain fear in the mere discovery of a verse form.

The Doctor loses his temper easily and is inclined to blurt out things in a very unprofessional manner. He is under a greater strain than any of the other speakers, including the prisoner himself; one might almost say that the Doctor is in a less enviable situation than the prisoner. Then, having so recently elevated himself to the status of arbiter of good and evil—an office which he would gladly return to the Priest and the Public Officer—he is frightened and inclines toward a conservative solution. For the time being, at least. Those arrogant-sounding expressions of his are actually anger at himself and at the failure of the others to do their part in the trial. Lastly, we can hardly countenance his definition of "decent persuasion" in awakening the Poet. A little atavism creeps in and a momentary reversion to the Faust tradition of science puts the Poet in the position of Mephistopheles! Nevertheless the Doctor hopes that the commonplace conception of honor will obtain for the future; and this, considering his ancient disinterest in honor, is pitiable.

Let us take the Public Officer third. I submit that he is more than the run of the mine Philistine or vice squad inspector or supreme court judge, although he embodies something of such people in his own make-up. The difference is that he not only judges the finished work of art but wants to have a say about its genesis and development. Consequently his meddling interest in forms and his ingratiating attentions to the Doctor. All this elegant and high-flown stunting about thoughtful harmony and the love-like force is therefore a bid to put himself in power as the dictator of forms. And the Public Officer is surprisingly careless about concealing his actual motive, almost as if he wants the court to know that under *his* state the Poet would be kept in the zoo. His fundamental error—and it is the error of the Doctor and the Priest also—is that poetry instructs, whether it intends to or not. You could never make these people see that poetry instructs

language only and that its function stops there. High purpose and low purpose are really quite secondary to the poem, and it is the hieratic sense of words with which the speakers are imbued that confuses them so. The printed word in particular they regard as the most sacrosanct form of language: we have often seen the ecclesiastical zeal with which they admit a questionable book into the ranks of their libraries or assign one to the Inferno Collection. Until quite recently the Doctor himself wrote parts of his monographs in Latin, the protective language of priests.

To return to this repudiation of forms which the Public Officer speaks of, it seems to me that he knows some such expression of change must exist in his normal city, and that to kill it off outright must upset his so-called balance of nature. Like Plato, therefore, he will let the Poet live, but only in exile or in the penitentiary. Like Plato, he hesitates to outrage the admirers of literature by putting the poet to death. But there is no mistaking his intention.

Finally, we review the Chorus. Offhand, it is difficult to sympathize with their first emotion, which seems to me nothing more than the sentimental ruminations of old soldiers who mistake the memory of the shock of battle for the pinnacle of experience, simply because that is their exclusive memory of importance. For, if I am not mistaken, the Chorus' emotion is a mixture of sincere good intention and insincere pity. There is a good deal of the sense of duty in their lines. Above all, they say, we must defend the atypical man from the professional man. It is perfectly clear, is it not, that their underlying belief makes out the Poet to be a better man, if a worse citizen, than all other men? Their bafflement is conceivably their inability to locate the good motive which they assume to exist even in the filthiest act of betrayal, and not their horror that a poet—a man by nature good—should commit a substantial evil. Thus, for the moment, the Chorus is content to shift the blame for the crime upon the age and its officialdom—churchmen, bureaucrats and scientists

alike—but not upon themselves, who faithfully recorded in the negative their criticism of history. But it takes very little to bring them into the role of missionaries and prophets and to make them pour out the same kind of abuse against "the audience" as the prisoner himself was inclined to employ throughout his career. Their bitterness is summed up in the speech that awakens their friend and in the imprecations that pierce his deep sleep. They demand a blood sacrifice for their own absolution, and to this plea the Poet revives. Throughout the remainder of their lines they continue to emphasize the accidental nature of the crime (as if the Poet were the victim of a conspiracy) and the mental sufferings he has undergone. In the last analysis they ask to share his guilt.

I will close with a few remarks on the speeches of the prisoner—myself—and then step down. It is understandable that the Poet chooses prose and the indirect defense rather than poetry and the frontal attack. The tag-ends of abuse combed from the history of English criticism and the second and third speeches, quoted verbatim from Thomas Love Peacock's revolting little essay on the four ages of poetry, are about all he can muster up for the court. Personally, I do not regard negative proof as the highest form of argument, but what the prisoner's quotations have to impart is as follows: (Those who apprehend the uses of poetry as knowledge are afraid of the poet (he thus infers the truth of the charges against him); all ages have deliberated his case and found him guilty; and finally, exile is preferable to local fame.)

The epigraph is taken from *Samson Agonistes* and reads as follows: Israel is poetry. Thy country is America. The Philistine is the enemy within. In destroying the works of the Philistine, the prisoner blindly destroyed himself.

I will now pass sentence. There is, of course, no fit punishment for poets but one. Prison is scarcely a hardship to the man who dwells in a universe of his own design. Exile has compensa-

tions also for the single wanderer. Death, under his fear, will only interest him. Confiscation will amuse him because he owns nothing and has burned more books than you will ever buy. Blindness will only make him see better. Broken bones will sharpen his wit. Sterilization will not concern him—he is already the apogee of his race. Therefore, for the crime of acting upon the sense of poetry as upon the sense of prose, I condemn the prisoner to be known hereafter as a dull poet and the lapdog of his age.

Doctor. I predict an incomplete recovery,
A touch of melancholia
And normal creativity on a minor scale.
After a hundred years
The students will still confuse
His poetry with his prose.

Priest. In his billowy satin sleeve
Satan snickers and prays
For the dubiously demonic modern man;
I see a small compound
In which the best poets stand
Each at his lectern shouting ignorant sound.
It is the festival
Of *Dada,* evil form
Of evil content. Then the newly damned
Poet of Poets arrives:
Hell bows to the ground
As with his teeth he rends his hundred books;
Far out in heaven a star
Loosed from its socket falls.
Samson Protagonistes slinks and barks.

Public Officer. Old skull-and-bones, culture's pirate,
May now return to the shores of Mu

And scratch in the valley of Mexico
For Naga—Maya and swastika,
The science folklore of ancient economics.
The State is not particularly anxious
To embarrass the ladies who knew him well
When he nibbled lotus in Dublin, Zurich,
Biarritz and Sinkiang.
This is the last of a lovely lot
Of post-Swinburnian voluptuaries
Who in a time of unlimited freedom
Could only assert their sense of liberty
By asking for living death or death.
Here's one who got his true request.

Doctor. Remove his genius to the dispensary.

Priest. Escort the sick sad man to his soul's cell.

Public Officer. Hence, loathed experimentalist!

[*The Poet is removed.*]

Chorus. The sun shines on the wreckage of Europe
Oblivious of an age's decay.
Mortal suffering is beyond his ken
And things of man's invention pass him by.
The sun shines on the smash-up of nations
With a benign and imbecile regard,
Bathing with sunny warmth the bridges lying awash
And cities of wonderful magnitude kicked to pieces.
A little while ago the inhabitants were all in motion
And with the speed of millions of terrified ants
Whose hill has been broken by a passing foot
Went to and fro in the world at top speed
Or at the ridiculous pace of man in primitive movies.

The world comes on, the world goes off,
And there is blue for night and red for fire
And sepia for sadness. The rain falls
On roofless nations with surprising populations
Who are too wet to hate or love,
Being more in the category of cattle.
The rain falls or the sun shines on the tundra of Europe
And equally, like lava on Herculaneum,
The moon glows on the ashes of schools.
O Evil, by definition the more attractive,
Where do you come from? Are you out of the sky,
Do we react to the hurricanes of fire
On the surface of the sun?
Do we behave to the phases of the moon
Or to some star so distant in the dark
It has no ray, and yet aims from the infinite field
Its vicious sperm? Nonsense, nonsense,
These are the lies of imagination that trap
Conceits for a volume of metaphors;
Yet you are not imaginary, not you, Evil,
With your exciting results that trap the mind
And make it the idle fulcrum of the Greek
To move the world. Greek, with your pretty circles,
Why did you wish to move the world?
Is this a clue to our decline?

The sun shines on the fall of the East,
Fallen by man-devised earthquakes
And iron men in iron swans riding with iron minds,
A bitter flock;
And still there is no clue to our decline
Except the evil evidence of evil.
Very well then, it is the irritant
Imbedded at birth in the soul of man

That breeds a pearl;
It is the sandy grain of sin
About which the immaculate spirit winds
Its pale pure nacrine.
Yet when the pearls are broken and dissolved
Is there a grain of sand or sin within?

Ours is the miracle of water and wine,
Stones to fishes, leaves to loaves,
And common clay to prayer and pleasure domes.
Yours is the miracle of the transubstantiation
Of sculpture to gravel, bread to dirt,
Fishes to chemicals, wine to vinegar.
—The crime? There was no crime. Prose is no crime.
There was, however, a failure of the word;
The failure was to fall into your hands.

Date Due

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NOV 0 5 1987			
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JUN 0 7 1988			
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